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Starting the Scheduling Conversation

Principals work in one of the most complex and challenging environments imaginable. Expected to provide a quality educational experience for each of their students in an era of high accountability, to balance the competing demands of parent and community groups with the needs of students, and to be knowledgeable experts about curriculum and instruction, they must at the same time manage the day-to-day functions of their schools. Principals must lead in providing a rich and engaging instructional program that is built and sustained on nurturing and caring relationships among students, teachers and other school personnel.

The professional literature tells us these meaningful relationships, so essential to the learning environment, are an outcome of learning communities built on a foundation of interdisciplinary teams. While the models for teaming vary in size and emphasis, most middle school interdisciplinary teams are comprised of two to five teachers who have primary responsibility for instructing a group of students in the basic academic areas. Teaming is the hallmark of a good middle school, and when effectively implemented, it positively impacts student learning and the school climate.

One of the forces driving the adoption of teaming is the recognition that when teachers collaborate, they can increase their effectiveness in fostering student learning by using a variety of instructional practices especially appropriate for young adolescents, ones that engage them intellectually and often physically as well. Essential to the use of these practices is a schedule that provides sufficient time for these more extensive strategies. Teams cannot achieve their full potential unless the schedule and other school structures are also modified. As a result, middle school educators have developed a variety of scheduling models to provide teachers and teams with a longer instructional block.

The importance of a shared vision

This book will discuss several important lessons learned by principals who have changed their schools' structures. Perhaps the most important lesson is that organisational patterns must be guided by clearly articulated and accepted goals. A quality schedule emerges only when teachers and administrators have worked together designing it – and that design is guided by a shared vision. Without common goals, the school schedule is merely an administrative plan for organising teachers and students into groups. When guided by identified goals, however, the schedule becomes a powerful tool to positively impact teaching and learning.

The experience of one school illustrates the importance of goals. For several years the faculty sought a way to “change the schedule”. They discussed options, visited other schools and debated the merits of alternative designs. Never did they talk directly about what they wanted to accomplish with a new schedule.

During the past year the staff returned to the question of a new schedule. This time, however, they spent considerable time discussing why they wanted to change, what they wanted to achieve and why a change would benefit students. Two critical goals emerged from the discussion – longer instructional blocks for each class and common planning time for teachers in their teams. Guided by these specific goals, a faculty committee quickly narrowed the schedule options and developed several alternatives from which the staff selected a “new” schedule.

In a seminal book on middle schools, *Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, Joan Lipsitz (1984) described the programs of four successful middle schools. Her analysis noted that while each school used a different organisational model, in every case the schedule was driven by the school's philosophy. While the schedule varied, each school's commitment to aligning its organisational model with the needs of students was a defining characteristic and was the single most important factor in selecting the model.

Factors affecting developmentally responsive schedules

In *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* (2003), the National Middle School Association outlined 14 attributes of successful middle schools. While all 14 of these interrelated characteristics indirectly impact curriculum and instruction, the following four are particularly relevant to scheduling:

- Students and teachers that engage in active learning.
- Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative and exploratory.
- Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity.
- Organisational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning. (p. 7)

In addition, schools and professional groups have begun to create visions of high-performing middle level schools that are rooted in creating personalised environments that can meet the developmental needs of young adolescents. Scheduling is an essential component of providing smaller learning environments in which teachers know their students on personal levels. A more accurate picture is painted of each student as multiple perspectives emerge from meetings when teams discuss their students and plan ways to support their ever-changing development.

As academic standards and results have continued to increase in importance, core subjects appear to be for some year levels taking up more of the schedule, while time for classes such as physical education and even social studies and science have been reduced. Some considerations, not always subject-specific, that need to be kept in mind as a school considers reconfiguring its schedule are

- Time for students to actively participate in transitioning from observing the concrete world to establishing relationships and reflecting on their experiences.
- Time for weighing options and making choices and decisions that will deepen students' abilities to reason and increase the responsibility they feel for their educations.
- Time for forming connections among subjects so young adolescents can understand the interrelatedness of what they are learning.
- Time for health and physical education experiences critical for young adolescents' establishing the lifestyle habits and choices that will help them negotiate the awkward times when their bodies are taking shape.
- Time for providing forums and related information sessions so students can understand the nature and consequences of risky behaviours and minimise the likelihood of developing unhealthy habits.
- Time for experiences that will help young adolescents struggling with the many choices, decisions, relationships and identity issues involved in their social and moral development.
- Time for opening to all students programs such as conflict management and peer mediation that put them in meaningful roles and help them feel connected.
- Time for exploring new areas of study that respond to their heightened curiosity.

All of these considerations, as well as many others, have clear scheduling implications, making the job of developing a balanced schedule a real challenge.

The concept of developmental responsiveness, which is central to the middle school movement, has often been misunderstood. Critics of the middle school suggest that it creates a climate in which attention to intellectual development is secondary to issues of self-esteem. Nothing could be further from the truth! When reporting on the intent of middle school advocates, such leaders as Dickinson (2001) and Jackson and Davis (2000) assert that the middle years are where intellectual development is central. However, middle level educators, cognisant of the developmental characteristics of 10- to 15-year-olds, know the many developmental changes that young adolescents experience often have a priority in their daily lives. Therefore, it is necessary for the school to help meet those developmental needs in order to effectively meet its primary academic responsibility.

Scheduling options

There are four primary ways to provide some flexibility in the schedule: the block schedule, the alternating schedule, the rotating schedule and the dropped schedule.

A block schedule creates longer instructional periods, called blocks, while an alternating schedule varies the schedule from day to day or semester to semester. The most common rotating model literally rotates the placement of classes from day to day, so that classes meet at different times. Finally, a dropped schedule drops one or two classes occasionally to allow a place for student clubs or other activities to meet during the school day.

While each of these alternatives to the traditional schedule has some merit, the model most frequently found in middle schools is the block schedule that supports interdisciplinary teaming and other middle school goals. Hackmann and Valentine (1998) claim, “the worth of interdisciplinary teaming has been so thoroughly documented that the issue has become a ‘given’ when speaking of organisational expectations of a quality middle level program” (p. 1). Accumulating experience and research studies do show that when teachers, individually or as a team, have longer instructional blocks, they modify their instructional practice, use more engaging hands-on activities, conduct deeper discussions of key concepts, and give students sufficient time to reflect on and make meaning of their learning.

Benefits of a block schedule

A block schedule, regardless of the particular model used, provides longer periods of instructional time than does a traditional fixed period-by-period schedule. This increased class time allows teachers to vary the format of their classes. Meri Kock, an year 8 maths teacher, found the block schedule expanded her educational repertoire.

Having the block time allows me to have the students conduct an experiment, take measurements, play mathematical games, collect data and then analyse what we’ve done while everything is still fresh in their minds. If the students want to explore some aspect of an activity further, I know I can take off in that direction with them without having to watch the clock or worry about the bell interrupting us. (Gallagher, 1999, p. 10)

Out-of-class activities, such as a nature walk or excursion can be carried out in the longer block. Debates, Socratic seminars, mock trials and cooperative learning activities are among the types of activities that work best in a block. Its flexibility allows teachers to conduct a wide selection of instructional strategies. No longer compelled to select approaches that fit within 45–50 minutes, teachers can choose instructional practices that tap their creativity and capitalise on the energy of students.

In addition to the potential instructional benefits, schools that implement longer instructional blocks frequently see a positive impact on school climate. There are often fewer class changes, resulting in fewer hallway incidents and stress for both students and teachers seems to be reduced.

The modifier of partner deserves special attention when used to describe a team. The key element in such teams is the achievement of partnership—a collaboration that involves the three central constituencies in every school: teachers, students, parents. The essential partnership that must be formed from the very beginning concerns the two teachers who work closely together to invent and sustain the educational program for the team. A second dimension of partnership is between the teachers and their students; exemplary teams are true communities of adults and children in which students have an active voice in their education. The third partnership is between the two adult constituencies—teachers and parents. When teachers and parents work well together, the children who are the objects of their efforts also thrive.

(Bishop, & Allen-Malley, 2004, p. viii)

Partner teams positively impact teaching and learning because of their smallness. When going from a four-person team with more than 100 students to a two-person team, you cut the number of students in half and work with those fewer students for twice as long! This change alone is significant, as it increases teachers' knowledge about and understanding of individual students, and student-teacher relationships deepen. Depending on the school's schedule, partner teams may have one long block, two smaller ones or a three-one split; but however their instructional time is set, the teachers can control how it is used.

A growing body of literature supports smaller teams, both in terms of academic effectiveness and teacher satisfaction, as well as earning the full endorsement of parents. Flowers, Mertens and Mulhall (2000) summarised longitudinal data from 70 middle schools and concluded "Clearly smaller teams are better able to manage not only the team coordination that is necessary for best practice, but also the classroom practices that serve to implement the programs" (p. 56). Small teams magnify the benefits of teaming. Although certification may present a problem for some teachers desiring to implement this practice, it is usually not an issue, as most middle school faculties include teachers holding elementary certification. National Middle School Association's book, *The Power of Two: Partner Teams in Action* (Bishop & Allen-Malley, 2004) allows one to step into the world of eight partner teams, understand how they work and gain an appreciation for the special advantages and rewards of partner teaming.